

WLG Reading Group - Session 3: *I am Still Whole and the Words Have Not Yet Been Destroyed* by Widji Thukul

Part 1: Introduction

As an artist-activist Dadang Christanto has always been inspired by Widji Thukul, a modern people's poet known for his protests against injustices. Born in 1963 in Solo, his poems are critical of the government and sociopolitical conditions of the country. In 1996 Thukul joined the People's Democratic Party, the first opposition party during the New Order. With simple and accessible words, he is able to depict the struggles of the people. Thukul went missing in 1998, the same year that Suharto stepped down.

(Participants introduced themselves)

Part 2: Participants read the poem collectively

Participants shared how they felt when reading the poem collectively (how that differs from reading the poem individually), as well as what intrigued them most:

- There is a collective voice when reading the poem in a group, an idea of a community that shares the same idea, and a certain resistance.
- The original Indonesian poem is more powerful.
- One part of the poem suggests a gory imagery that is very striking:
even though my eyeballs are gouged and replaced.
- The poem suggests the power of words; even though the body dies, words live on.
- Towards the end of the poem, readers feel a certain optimism. Dadang added that Widji Thukul was an optimistic man even though he was a 'wanted' person, the year that he wrote the poem.
- It is difficult to capture the feeling of the poem when reading it in a group setting. The meanings are distorted.
- The first three lines are strong:
*I am not an artist that makes news
but for certain I am always bad news for
those in power*

(Dadang clarified that the Indonesian version uses the word 'artis' (celebrity), instead of 'seniman' in the first line.)

Part 3: Reflection on question #1: *Now that we no longer live in an offline society, how is freedom of expression and other human rights realised in the online context? Consider the information overload online and how our speech may feel like a shout into the void.*

- It is interesting to talk about the relationship between text and image, especially in the media. The way we relate the two effects how these materials are perceived.
- Indonesian artists and poets such as Widji Thukul may have felt that they were 'shouting into the void' when they started going against the New Order, however they were persistent.
- A collective change often starts with one person. For example digital artist Fahmi Reza (@kuasasiswa) and Bersih in Malaysia; these movements started small. People should not be afraid to put out their thoughts.
- With the internet, it has actually gotten better; there has been more room to put out our message. 10-15 years ago when Facebook just started, people in Malaysia were afraid of being punished for writing. However, people are now very angry and feel the necessity to express themselves.

- The Internet has so much potential and is very uncertain; there would either be no more void or a bigger void in the future.
- People need to be aware of the things that enable discrimination and inequality, before they comment on these notions.
- With so many possibilities that the internet can offer, we need to think about the strategies of engagement that are effective. It is also a question of 'breaking the bubble' or going against the algorithm of social media.

Part 4: Reflection on question #2: *What are the responsibilities of artists, writers and intellectuals (often branded as troublemakers) in turbulent, political times? What are their challenges?*

- The role of an artist is to comment on what is happening around us. There are a few examples of artists in Malaysia who are rebellious (often in subtle ways):
 - > For example, after 13 May 1969, Ibrahim Husein painted a Malaysian flag in black. The sponsor of the exhibition refused to show it, however the Prime Minister, Tun Razak, gave a green light to showcase it.
 - > Ahmad Fuad Osman had an exhibition at Balai Seni Negara in 2020. However, after having the proposal approved, and after the show ran for a few weeks, certain artworks were taken down. His works showed the landscape of human conditions.
 - > The collective Pangrok Sulap from Sabah is also very out-spoken.
1. The reason why Malaysian artists' political comments need to be subtle is because they need to get around the law and face the challenge of censorship.
 2. In terms of writings and publications, there seems to be more hope recently with the rise of independent publishers.
 3. When artists include activism in their works, they would hold different impacts. In this day and age, especially with the rise of media, it is easy to have a claim of activism and social movement. The question now is, how can artists show a deeper engagement?
 4. The responsibility lies both the writer and the reader; they are on the same level. The artists should create work to make us remember the tragedies that have happened. However, the responsibility must be shared (between the author and the audience).
 5. Widji Thukul as an artist relentlessly campaigns for what he believes in. There might be others who share the same opinion as he does but are living with fear, yet he motivates them to speak up.

Part 5: Conclusion

According to Dadang, Widji Thukul is a 'troublemaker' when it comes to standing up for what he believes in. He set up 'Sanggar Suka Banjir', a community, sharing and informal teaching platform for activist artists and poets. The community was banned by the military force, yet just a few days later, he still showed up and conducted his activities despite the ban. He has always been brave and rebellious. What he did reflects the role and quality of an artist.

By putting their voice out there, artists are doing their role of sparking solidarity. It ties back to the title of the poem itself - *I am Still Whole and the Words Have Not Yet Been Destroyed*. Even though Widji Thukul might no longer be there, the words create ripples that continue to inspire and bring courage to others. His artwork serves as a reminder of an act against forgetting.

Part 6: Participants read the poem collectively